RED

BY JOHN LOGAN

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DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

RED

Scene 1

Rothko stands, staring forward. He is looking directly at the audience. (He is actually studying one of his Seagram Mural paintings, which hangs before him.) Pause. Rothko lights a cigarette. He wears thick glasses and old, ill-fitting clothes spattered with specks of glue and paint. Contemplative classical music is playing on a phonograph. (Rothko favored Mozart and Schubert.) Rothko takes a drag on his cigarette. Pause. There is the sound of a door opening and closing from the unseen entry vestibule offstage. Ken, a man in his early twenties, enters nervously. He wears a suit and tie. This is the first time he has been in the studio. He looks around. He is about to speak. Rothko gestures for him not to speak. Then he beckons for Ken to join him. Ken goes to Rothko, stands next to him. Rothko indicates the central painting; the audience.

ROTHKO. What do you see? *(Ken is about to respond —)* Wait. Stand closer. You've got to get close. Let it pulsate. Let it work on you. Closer. Too close. There. Let it spread out. Let it wrap its arms around you; let it *embrace* you, filling even your peripheral vision so nothing else exists or has ever existed or will ever exist. Let the picture do its work — but work with it. Meet it halfway for God's sake! Lean forward, lean into it. Engage with it! ... Now, what do you see? — Wait, wait, wait! *(He hurries and lowers the lighting a bit, then returns to Ken.)* So, now, what do you see? — Be specific. No, be exact. Be exact — but sensitive. You understand? Be kind. Be a human being, that's all I can say. Be a *human being* for once in your life! These pictures deserve compassion and they live or die in the eye of the sensitive viewer, they quicken only if the empa-

thetic viewer will let them. That is what they cry out for. That is why they were created. That is what they deserve ... Now ... What do you see? *(Beat.)*
KEN. Red.
ROTHKO. But do you *like* it?
KEN. Mm.
ROTHKO. Speak up.
KEN. Yes.
ROTHKO. Of course you *like* it — how can you not *like* it?! Everyone likes everything nowadays. They like the television and the phonograph and the soda pop and the shampoo and the Cracker Jack. Everything becomes everything else and it's all nice and pretty and *likable.* Everything is fun in the sun! Where's the discernment? Where's the arbitration that separates what I *like* from what I *respect,* what I deem *worthy,* what has ... listen to me now ... *significance. (Rothko moves and turns up the lights again, although he keeps them relatively low, and then switches off the record player, as he continues.)* Maybe this is a dinosaur talking. Maybe I'm a dinosaur sucking up the oxygen from you cunning little mammals hiding in the bushes waiting to take over. Maybe I'm speaking a lost language unknown to your generation. But a generation that does not aspire to seriousness, to meaning, is unworthy to walk in the shadow of those who have gone before, I mean those who have struggled and surmounted, I mean those who have aspired, I mean Rembrandt, I mean Turner, I mean Michelangelo and Matisse ... I mean obviously Rothko. *(He stares at Ken, challenging.)* Do you aspire?
KEN. Yes.
ROTHKO. To what? To what do you aspire?
KEN. I want to be a painter so I guess I aspire to ... painting.
ROTHKO. Then those clothes won't do. We work here. Hang up your jacket outside. I appreciate you put on your Sunday clothes to impress me, it's poignant really, touches me, but it's ridiculous. We work hard here; this isn't a goddamn Old World salon with tea cakes and lemonade. Go hang up your jacket outside. *(Ken exits to the entry vestibule offstage. He returns without his jacket. Takes off his tie and rolls up his sleeves.)* Sidney told you what I need here?
KEN. Yes. *(Rothko busies himself, sorting brushes, arranging canvases, etc, as:)*
ROTHKO. We start every morning at nine and work until five. Just like bankers. You'll help me stretch the canvases and mix the paints

and clean the brushes and build the stretchers and move the paintings and also help apply the ground color — which is *not* painting, so any lunatic assumptions you make in that direction you need to banish immediately. You'll pick up food and cigarettes and anything else I want, any whim, no matter how demanding or demeaning. If you don't like that, leave right now. Answer me. Yes or no.
KEN. Yes.
ROTHKO. Consider: I am not your rabbi, I am not your father, I am not your shrink, I am not your friend, I am not your teacher — I am your employer. You understand?
KEN. Yes.
ROTHKO. As my assistant you will see many things here, many ingenious things. But they're all secret. You cannot talk about any of this. Don't think I don't have enemies because I do and I don't just mean the other painters and gallery owners and museum curators and goddamn-son-of-a-bitch-art-critics, not to mention that vast panoply of disgruntled viewers who loathe me and my work because they do not have the heart, nor the patience, nor the capacity, to think, to *understand,* because they are not *human beings,* like we talked about, you remember?
KEN. Yes.
ROTHKO. I'm painting a series of murals now — *(He gestures all around.)* I'll probably do thirty or forty and then choose which work best, in concert, like a fugue. You'll help me put on the undercoat and then I'll paint them and then I'll look at them and then paint some more. I do a lot of layers, one after another, like a glaze, slowly building the image, like pentimento, letting the luminescence emerge until it's done.
KEN. How do you know when it's done?
ROTHKO. There's tragedy in every brushstroke.
KEN. Ah.
ROTHKO. Swell. Let's have a drink. *(Rothko pours two glasses of Scotch. He hands one to Ken. They drink. Ken is unused to drinking so early in the morning. Beat. Rothko stares at him, appraising.)* Answer me a question ... Don't think about it, just say the first thing that comes into your head. No cognition.
KEN. Okay.
ROTHKO. You ready?
KEN. Yeah.
ROTHKO. Who's your favorite painter?

KEN. Jackson Pollock.
ROTHKO. *(Wounded.)* Ah.
KEN. Sorry.
ROTHKO. No, no —
KEN. Let me do it again.
ROTHKO. No —
KEN. Come on —
ROTHKO. No, it's silly —
KEN. Come on, ask me again.
ROTHKO. Who's your favorite painter?
KEN. Picasso. *(Ken laughs. Rothko doesn't. Rothko glowers at him. Ken's laugh dies. Rothko roams.)*
ROTHKO. Hmm, Pollock ... always Pollock. Don't get me wrong, he was a great painter, we came up together, I knew him very well.
KEN. What was he like?
ROTHKO. You read Nietzsche?
KEN. What?
ROTHKO. You ever read Nietzsche? *The Birth of Tragedy*?
KEN. No.
ROTHKO. You call yourself an artist? One can't discuss Pollock without it. One can't discuss anything without it. What do they teach you in art school now?
KEN. I —
ROTKO. You ever read Freud?
KEN. No —
ROTHKO. Jung?
KEN. Well —
ROTHKO. Byron? Wordsworth? Aeschylus? Turgenev? Sophocles? Schopenhauer? Shakespeare? *Hamlet*? At least *Hamlet*, please God! Quote me *Hamlet*. Right now.
KEN. "To be or not to be, that is the question."
ROTHKO. Is that the question?
KEN. I don't know.
ROTHKO. You have a lot to learn, young man. Philosophy. Theology. Literature. Poetry. Drama. History. Archaeology. Anthropology. Mythology. Music. These are your tools as much as brush and pigment. You cannot be an *artist* until you are civilized. You cannot be *civilized* until you learn. To be civilized is to know where you belong in the continuum of your art and your world. To surmount the past, you must know the past.

KEN. I thought you weren't my teacher.
ROTHKO. You should be so blessed I talk to you about art. *(Rothko moves away. Beat.)* How do you feel?
KEN. How do I feel? *(Rothko indicates the huge mural paintings all around them.)*
ROTHKO. How do *they* make you feel?
KEN. Give me a second. *(Ken moves to the middle of the room and takes in all the paintings.)*
ROTHKO. So?
KEN. Give me a second. *(Beat.)* Disquieted.
ROTHKO. And?
KEN. Thoughtful.
ROTHKO. And?
KEN. Um ... Sad.
ROTHKO. *Tragic.*
KEN. Yeah.
ROTHKO. They're for a restaurant.
KEN. What?
ROTHKO. They're for a restaurant. *(Rothko smiles. He enjoys this.)* So I'm minding my own business when Mister Philip Johnson calls me. You know Mister Philip Johnson, the world-renowned architect?
KEN. Not personally.
ROTHKO. Of course you don't know him personally, you don't know anyone personally. Don't interrupt. Mister Philip Johnson calls me. He's designing the new Seagram Building on Park Avenue, he and Mies van der Rohe. These are names with which to conjure, are they not? Philip Johnson and Mies van der Rohe, titans of their field, revolutionists. Together they are making a building unlike anything the world has yet seen, reflecting the golden ambitions of not only this city and its inhabitants but of all mankind. In this building there is to be a restaurant called the Four Seasons, like the Vivaldi, and on the walls of this restaurant ... *(He gestures expansively to his paintings. Beat. Proud.)* Thirty-five thousand dollars they are paying me. No other painter comes close. *(Ken is impressed. Thirty-five thousand dollars is a fortune. Call it two million dollars in today's money. Rothko walks to the center of the room, filling himself with the work.)* My first murals ... Imagine a frieze all around the room, a continuous narrative filling the walls, one to another, each a new chapter, the story unfolding, look and they are there, inescapable and inexorable, like doom.

KEN. Are these ones done?
ROTHKO. They're in process. I have to study them now.
KEN. Study them?
ROTHKO. Most of painting is thinking. Didn't they teach you that? ... Ten percent is putting paint onto the canvas. The rest is waiting. *(Rothko takes in his paintings.)* All my life I wanted just this, my friend: to create a *place* ... A place where the viewer could live in contemplation with the work and give it some of the same attention and care I gave it. Like a chapel ... A place of communion.
KEN. But ... it's a restaurant.
ROTHKO. No ... I will make it a temple. *(Beat. Rothko is lost in his paintings. Ken watches him for a moment. Then he moves to the phonograph. He turns it on, lowers the needle. The classical music plays. He studies Rothko.)*

Scene 2

Rothko stands starting at the central painting; the audience. Classical music plays from the phonograph. Ken enters. He carries bags of Chinese takeout food. He now wears work clothes splattered with paint and glue. Months have passed, and he is more comfortable here. Ken puts a handful of change into an empty coffee can and then unloads the cartons of food. Rothko muses.

ROTHKO. Rembrandt and Rothko ... Rembrandt and Rothko ... Rothko and Rembrandt ... Rothko and Rembrandt ... And Turner. Rothko and Rembrandt and Turner ... Rothko and Rembrandt and Turner —
KEN. — Oh my. *(Beat. Rothko lights a cigarette.)* The Chinese place is closing.
ROTHKO. Everything worthwhile ends. We are in the perpetual process now: creation, maturation, cessation.
KEN. There's another Chinese round the corner.
ROTHKO. The eternal cycles grind on, generations pass away, hope turns arid, but there's another Chinese round the corner.

KEN. Not much for small talk.
ROTHKO. It's small. *(He joins Ken. He stands and eats Chinese food messily with a fork through the following.)*
KEN. I went to the Modern last night, saw the Picasso show.
ROTHKO. And?
KEN. I don't think he's so much concerned with generations passing away.
ROTHKO. Don't kid yourself, kid. That man — though now a charlatan, of course, signing menus for money like Dali, when he's not making ugly little pots, also for money — that man at his best understood the workings of time ... Where's the receipt? *(Ken gives him the receipt for the Chinese food. Rothko puts it into a shoebox filled with other receipts as he continues without stopping.)* Tragic, really, to grow superfluous in your own lifetime. We destroyed Cubism, de Kooning and me and Pollock and Barnett Newman and all the others. We stomped it to death. Nobody can paint a Cubist picture today.
KEN. You take pride in that. "Stomping" Cubism to death.
ROTHKO. The child must banish the father. Respect him, but kill him.
KEN. And enjoy it?
ROTHKO. Doesn't matter. Just be audacious and do it ... Courage in painting isn't facing the blank canvas, it's facing Manet, it's facing Velasquez. All we can do is move beyond what was there, to what is here, and hope to get some intimation of what will be here. "What is past and passing and to come." That's Yeats, whom you haven't read.
KEN. Come on, but Picasso — *(Rothko tries another carton of food, keeps eating.)*
ROTHKO. Picasso I thank for teaching me that movement is everything! Movement is life. The second we're born we squall, we writhe, we squirm; to live is to move. Without movement paintings are what?
KEN. Dead?
ROTHKO. Precisely *(He gestures to his paintings.)* ... Look at the *tension* between the blocks of color: the dark and the light, the red and the black and the brown. They exist in a state of flux — of movement. They abut each other on the actual canvas, so too do they abut each other in your eye. They ebb and flow and shift, gently pulsating. The more you look at them the more they move ... They float in space, they breathe ... Movement, communication, gesture, flux,

interaction; letting them work ... They're not dead because they're not static. They move through space if you let them, this movement takes time, so they're temporal. They require *time.*
KEN. They demand it. They don't work without it.
ROTHKO. This is why it's so important to me to create a *place.* A place the viewer can contemplate the paintings over time and let them move.
KEN. *(Excited.)* They *need* the viewer. They're not like representational pictures, like traditional landscapes or portraits.
ROTHKO. Tell me why.
KEN. Because they *change,* they move, they pulse. Representational pictures are unchanging; they don't require the active participation of the viewer. In the Louvre in the middle of the night the "Mona Lisa" is still smiling. But do these paintings still pulse when they're alone? *(Ken is lost in thought. Rothko watches him, pleased.)* That's why you keep the lights so low.
ROTHKO. Is it?
KEN. To help the illusion. Like a magician. Like a play. To keep it mysterious, to let the pictures pulsate. Turn on bright lights and the stage effect is ruined — suddenly it's nothing but a bare stage with a bunch of fake walls. *(Ken goes to the light switches. He snaps on all the lights. Ugly fluorescent lights sizzle on. The room immediately loses its magic.)*
ROTHKO. What do you see?
KEN. My eyes are adjusting ... Just ... White.
ROTHKO. What does white make you think of?
KEN. Bones, skeletons ... Charnel house ... Anemia ... *Cruelty. (Rothko is surprised by this response.)*
ROTHKO. Really?
KEN. It's like an operating theatre now.
ROTHKO. How does white make you *feel?*
KEN. Frightened?
ROTHKO. Why?
KEN. Doesn't matter.
ROTHKO. Why?
KEN. It's like the snow ... outside the room where my parents died. It was winter. I remember the snow outside the window: white *(Turns his attention to the paintings.)* ... And the pictures in this light ... They're flat. Vulgar ... This light hurts them. *(Rothko turns off the fluorescent lights. The normal light returns.)*

ROTHKO. You see how it is with them? How vulnerable they are? ... People think I'm controlling: controlling the light; controlling the height of the pictures; controlling the shape of the gallery ... It's not controlling, it's *protecting.* A picture lives by companionship. It dies by the same token. It's a risky act to send it out into the world. *(Ken tosses away the cartons of food and straightens up. Rothko puts on a new classical record. Moves back to studying his central painting. A beat as the mood settles.)*
KEN. You ever paint outdoors?
ROTHKO. You mean out in nature?
KEN. Yeah.
ROTHKO. Nature doesn't work for me. The light's no good. *(Ken is amused.)* All those bugs — ach! I know, those *plein air* painters, they sing to you endless paeans about the majesty of natural sunlight. Get out there and muck around in the grass, they tell you, like a cow. When I was young I didn't know any better so I would haul my supplies out there and the wind would blow the paper and the easel would fall over and the ants would get in the paint. Oy ... But then I go to Rome for the first time. I go to the Santa Maria del Popolo to see Caravaggio's *Conversion of Saul,* which turns out is tucked away in a dark corner of this dark church with no natural light. It's like a cave. But the painting *glowed!* With a sort of *rapture* it glowed. Consider: Caravaggio was commissioned to paint the picture for this specific place, he had no choice. He stands there and he looks around. It's like under the ocean it's so goddamn dark. How's he going to paint here? He turns to his creator: "God, help me, unworthy sinner that I am. Tell me, O Lord on High, what the fuck do I do now?!" *(Ken laughs.)* Then it comes to him: the divine spark. He illuminates the picture from *within!* He gives it *inner* luminosity. It *lives* ... Like one of those bioluminescent fish from the bottom of the ocean, radiating its own effulgence. You understand? Caravaggio was — *(He abruptly stops. Ken looks at him. Beat. Rothko stares at his painting. He tilts his head. Like he's listening. Like he's seeing something new in the painting.)* Bring me the second bucket. *(Ken, excited, brings him a brush and a bucket of dark maroon paint.)*
KEN. Are you really going to paint?
ROTHKO. What the hell do you think I *have* been doing?! *(Ken retreats. He watches Rothko closely. Rothko dips the five-inch housepainter's brush into the paint. He's ready. Then he stands there, frozen.*

Just his eyes move craftily over the canvas. Paint drips. Ken is breathless. Rothko is coiled. He tilts his head, studying, adjudicating. He considers the color of the paint in the bucket. Needs something.) Gimme black number four and the first maroon. *(Ken brings some powdered pigments in old jars. Rothko instructs, still barely moving. His eyes dart from the bucket of paint to the canvas.)* A pinch of black. *(Ken adds a bit of black pigment, stirs it carefully.)* Just that amount again. *(Ken adds a bit more, keeps stirring.)* Twice as much maroon. *(Ken adds some maroon pigment, keeps stirring. Rothko is unsure. He looks at the painting. The moment is passing. He is getting desperate. To himself, frustrated.)* Come on ... come on ... come on ... What does it need?

KEN. Red.

ROTHKO. I wasn't talking to you! *(Beat. Tragically, the moment has passed for Rothko. He flings the paintbrush away. It splatters. He spins on Ken.)* DON'T YOU EVER DO THAT AGAIN! *(He rages, stomping restlessly around the room:)* By what right do you speak?! By what right do you express an opinion on my work? Who the fuck are you? What have you done? What have you seen? Where have you earned the right to exist here with me and these things you don't understand?! "RED"?! You want to paint the thing?! Go ahead — here's red — ! *(He clumsily slings packets of various red paints at Ken.)* And red! And red! And red! — I don't even know what that means! What does "red" mean to me? You mean scarlet? You mean crimson? You mean plum-mulberry-magenta-burgundy-salmon-carmine-carnelian-coral? Anything but "red"! What is "RED"?! *(Rothko stands, getting his breath, collecting himself. Beat. Ken picks up the packets of paint from the floor. Rothko prowls, discontent. Pause.)*

KEN. I meant sunrise.

ROTHKO. Sunrise?

KEN. I meant the red at sunrise ... The feeling of it.

ROTHKO. *(Derisive.)* Oh, the "feeling of it." *(Beat. Ken continues to clean up, clearing away the bucket of paint and brush. Beat.)* What do you mean the feeling of it?

KEN. I didn't mean red paint only. I meant the *emotion* of red at sunrise.

ROTHKO. Sunrise isn't red.

KEN. Yes it is.

ROTHKO. I'm telling you it's not.

KEN. Sunrise is red and red is sunrise. *(Ken keeps cleaning up.)* Red is heartbeat. Red is passion. Red wine. Red roses. Red lipstick. Beets. Tulips. Peppers.
ROTHKO. Arterial blood.
KEN. That too. *(Rothko thinks about it.)*
ROTHKO. Rust on the bike on the lawn.
KEN. And apples ... And tomatoes.
ROTHKO. Dresden firestorm at night. The sun in Rousseau, the flag in Delacroix, the robe in El Greco.
KEN. A rabbit's nose. An albino's eyes. A parakeet.
ROTHKO. Florentine marble. Atomic flash. Nick yourself shaving, blood in the Barbasol.
KEN. The ruby slippers. Technicolor. That phone to the Kremlin on the president's desk.
ROTHKO. Russian flag, Nazi flag, Chinese flag.
KEN. Persimmons. Pomegranates. Redlight district. Red tape. Rouge.
ROTHKO. Lava. Lobsters. Scorpions.
KEN. Stop sign. Sports car. A blush.
ROTHKO. Viscera. Flame. Dead Fauvists.
KEN. Traffic lights. Titian hair.
ROTHKO. Slash your wrists. Blood in the sink.
KEN. Santa Claus.
ROTHKO. Satan. *(Beat.)* So ... red.
KEN. Exactly. *(Rothko gazes thoughtfully at his painting.)*
ROTHKO. We got more cigarettes? *(Ken gets a pack of cigarettes from a drawer and tosses them to Rothko. Rothko opens them and lights one as:)* More than anything, you know what?
KEN. What?
ROTHKO. Matisse's painting *The Red Studio.* It's a picture of his own studio; the walls are a brilliant red, the floor and furniture, all red, like the color had radiated out of him and swallowed everything up. When the Modern first put that picture up I would spend hours looking at it. Day after day I would go ... You could argue that everything I do today, you can trace the bloodlines back to that painting and those hours standing there, letting the painting work, allowing it to *move* ... The more I looked at it the more it pulsated around me, I was totally saturated, it swallowed me ... Such *plains* of red he made, such energetic blocks of color, such emotion! *(Beat. Rothko sits in an old armchair, staring at the central*

painting. Exhausted and depressed. Ken senses the change in Rothko's mood. Rothko takes off his thick glasses, cleans them on his shirt as:)
That was a long time ago.
KEN. It's still there.
ROTHKO. I can't look at it now.
KEN. Why?
ROTHKO. It's too depressing.
KEN. How can all that red be depressing?
ROTHKO. I don't see the red anymore ... Even in that painting, that total and profound immersion in red ... it's there. The mantel above a dresser, just over the centerline, set off by yellow of all god-damn things. He wanted it inescapable.
KEN. What?
ROTHKO. Black.
KEN. The color black?
ROTHKO. The thing black. *(Beat.)* There is only one thing I fear in life, my friend ... One day the black will swallow the red. *(He puts on his glasses again and stares at his painting.)*

Scene 3

Ken is alone. He is at a stove or burner, gently heating and stirring liquid in a large pot. This mixture will be the base layer for a new blank canvas. A small painting, wrapped in brown paper, is tucked unobtrusively in a corner. He talks on the phone as he stirs.

KEN. *(On phone.)* ... That's easy for you to say, you don't know him *(He glances to the wrapped painting.)* ... I'll show it to him if I think the moment's right. He knows I'm a painter; he's got to be expecting it, right? ... No, no, it depends on his mood ... Don't tell me what to do! You're just like him ... *(He hears the sounds of Rothko entering outside. On phone.)* He's here. I'll tell you how it goes. Pray for me. *(He hangs up. Rothko enters with some supplies for the base layer. He does not notice the wrapped painting.)* Good morning.
ROTHKO. Morning. I got the other maroon ... I'll take over, you

finish the canvas. *(Rothko goes to the pot and takes over stirring. He adds some new maroon pigment to the mixture. Like concocting a witch's brew, he also stirs in glue, chemicals, chalk, raw eggs, and other powdered pigments. Ken works on tightening and stapling a blank canvas. It is square, about six feet by six feet or larger.)* I went by the Seagram building last night, it's coming along.

KEN. How's the restaurant?

ROTHKO. Still under construction, but they took me around, got a sense of it.

KEN. And?

ROTHKO. Too much natural light, as always, but it'll work. You'll be able to see the murals from the main dining room ... I made some sketches; I'll find them for you.

KEN. You ever worry it's not the right place for them?

ROTHKO. How can it not be the right place for them when they are being created specifically for that place? Sometimes your logic baffles me. *(Rothko goes to the phonograph and flips through the records. Ken glances again to his wrapped painting. Is this the time to bring it up? No. He doesn't have the nerve quite yet. Rothko picks a classical record and puts it on. Then he returns to stirring the mixture. Beat.)*

KEN. So I read Nietzsche. *Birth of Tragedy,* like you said.

ROTHKO. Like I said?

KEN. You said if I wanted to know about Jackson Pollock I had to read *The Birth of Tragedy.*

ROTHKO. I said that?

KEN. Yeah.

ROTHKO. I don't remember. It's very like something I would say.

KEN. So what about Pollock?

ROTHKO. First tell me what you make of the book.

KEN. Interesting.

ROTHKO. That's like saying "red." Don't be enigmatic; you're too young to be enigmatic.

KEN. I think I know why you wanted me to read it.

ROTHKO. Why?

KEN. Because you see yourself as Apollo and you see him as Dionysus.

ROTHKO. Don't be so pedestrian. Think more. *(Rothko adds turpentine to the mixture, checks the consistency by letting it run off his paint stirrer. He wants it thin, like a glaze. Ken stops working.)*

KEN. Dionysus is the god of wine and excess; of movement and transformation. This is Pollock: wild, rebellious, drunken, and unrestrained. The raw experience itself ... Apollo is the god of order, method, and boundaries. This is Rothko: intellectual, rabbinical, sober, and restrained. The raw experience leavened by contemplation ... He splatters paint. You study it ... He's Dionysus and you're Apollo.
ROTHKO. Exactly right but for entirely missing the point.
KEN. How so?
ROTHKO. You miss the tragedy. The point is always the tragedy.
KEN. For you.
ROTHKO. You think human beings can be divided up so neatly into character types? You think the multifarious complexities and nuances of the psyche — evolving through countless generations, perverted and demented through social neurosis and personal anguish, molded by faith and lack of faith — can really be so goddamn simple? Pollock is Emotion and Rothko is Intellect? You embarrass yourself ... Think more. *(Ken thinks as he continues to work on the canvas. Rothko continues to stir the paint, occasionally glancing at Ken. Ken stops.)*
KEN. Maybe it's like one of your paintings.
ROTHKO. Most things are. How?
KEN. Dark and light, order and chaos, existing at the same time in the same plain, pulsing back and forth ... We pulse too; we're subjects of both Apollo *and* Dionysus, not one or the other. We ebb and flow, like the colors in your pictures, the ecstasy of the Dionysian at war with the restraint of the Apollonian.
ROTHKO. Not at war.
KEN. Not at war?
ROTHKO. It's not really conflict. More like symbiosis.
KEN. They need each other. Dionysus' passion is focused — is made bearable — by Apollo's will to form. In fact the only way we can *endure* the sheer ferocity of Dionysus' emotion is because we have the control and intelligence of Apollo, otherwise the emotion would overwhelm us ... So back and forth we go, myth to myth, pulsating.
ROTHKO. And the perfect life would be perfectly balanced between the two, everlastingly on the fulcrum. But our *tragedy* is that we can never achieve that balance. We exist — all of us, for all time — in a state of perpetual dissonance ... We long for the raw

truth of emotion, but can only endure it with the cool lie of reason ... We seek to capture the ephemeral, the miraculous, and put it onto canvas, stopping time but, like an entomologist pinning a butterfly, it dies when we try ... We're foolish that way, we human beings ... We try to make the red black.
KEN. But the black is always there, like the mantel in Matisse.
ROTHKO. Like the snow outside the window. It never goes away. Once glimpsed, we can't help being preoccupied with it for the intimations of our mortality are *(He gestures: everywhere.)* ... But still we go on, clinging to that tiny bit of hope — that red — that makes the rest endurable.
KEN. Or just less unendurable.
ROTHKO. That's my friend Jackson Pollock. Finally it was just unendurable.
KEN. What do you mean?
ROTHKO. His suicide.
KEN. He didn't commit suicide.
ROTHKO. Didn't he? *(Ken thinks about this as he continues to tighten the canvas. Rothko isn't satisfied with the music. He puts on a different classical record. He listens for a moment and then returns to stirring the mixture.)*
KEN. Jackson Pollock died in a car accident.
ROTHKO. A man spends years getting drunk, day after day, hammered. Then he gets into an Oldsmobile convertible and races around these little country roads like a lunatic. You tell me what that is if not a lazy suicide ... Believe me, when I commit suicide there won't be any doubt about it. No mysterious crumpled car in a ditch, did he or didn't he, it gives me a headache it's so boring.
KEN. "When" you commit suicide?
ROTHKO. What?
KEN. You said "When I commit suicide."
ROTHKO. No I didn't.
KEN. You did.
ROTHKO. You misheard ... Let me tell you one thing about your hero, that man really confronted his tragedy. He was valiant in the face of it, he endured as long as he could, then he tried to recede from life, but how could he? He was Jackson Pollock.
KEN. What was his tragedy?
ROTHKO. He became famous.
KEN. Don't be glib.

ROTHKO. His muse evacuated. He grew tired of his form. He grew tired of himself. He lost faith in his viewers ... Take your pick ... He no longer believed there were any real human beings out there to look at pictures.
KEN. How does that happen to a man?
ROTHKO. Better you should ask how occasionally it doesn't happen.
KEN. I mean he's an artist, he's in *Life* magazine, he's young, he's famous, he has money —
ROTHKO. That's exactly it. Here's a schmuck from Wyoming who can paint. Suddenly he's a *commodity.* He's "Jackson Pollock." Lemme tell you, kid, that Oldsmobile convertible really did kill him. Not because it crashed, because it *existed.* Why the fuck did Jackson Pollock have an Oldsmobile convertible?
KEN. So artists should starve?
ROTHKO. Yes, artists should starve. Except me. *(Ken smiles. He has completed working on the canvas.)*
KEN. Take a look. *(Rothko moves to the canvas, stands over it, carefully studying it, walking around it. He is looking for flaws in the canvas, as:)*
ROTHKO. You would have loved Jackson. He was a downtown guy, a real Bohemian. No banker's hours for him, believe you me. Every night the drinking and the talking and the fighting and the dancing and the staying up late; like everyone's romantic idea of what an artist ought to be: the anti-Rothko ... At his worst you still loved him, though; you loved him because he loved art so much ... He thought it *mattered.* He thought painting mattered ... Does not the poignancy stop your heart? ... How could this story not end in tragedy? *(Beat.)* Goya said, "We have Art that we may not perish from Truth." ... Pollock saw some truth. Then he didn't have art to protect him anymore ... Who could survive that? *(Beat. Rothko emerges from his thoughts. He nods to Ken. They lift the canvas from the floor, lean it up against a sawhorse, easel, or wall. Rothko studies it minutely. He delicately picks lint from the canvas. He gently blows remnants of dust away. He continues to study the canvas as:)* I was walking up to my house last week and this couple was passing. Lady looks in the window, says: "I wonder who owns all the Rothkos." ... Just like that I'm a noun. A Rothko.
KEN. A commodity.
ROTHKO. An overmantel.

KEN. A what? *(Rothko continues to study the blank canvas for flaws, for discoloration, for imperfection. He moves closer, he backs all the way up, he moves closer again, tilting his head back and forth, adjudicating, as:)*

ROTHKO. The overmantels. Those paintings doomed to become *decoration.* You know, over the fireplace in the penthouse. They say to you, "I need something to work with the sofa, you understand. Or something bright and cheery for the breakfast nook, which is orange, do you have anything in orange? Or burnt umber? Or sea-foam green? Here's a paint chip from the Sherwin-Williams. And could you cut it down to fit the sideboard?"... Or even worse, "Darling, I simply *must* have one because my neighbor has one, that social-climbing bitch, in fact if she has one, I need *three!*" ... Or even worse, "I must have one because the *New York Times* tells me I should have one — or someone told me the *New York Times* tells me I should have one because who has time to read anymore." ... "Oh, don't make me look at it! I never look at it! It's so depressing!" ... "All those fuzzy rectangles, my kid could do that in kindergarten, it's nothing but a scam, this guy's a fraud" ... Still, they buy it ... It's an investment ... It's screwing the neighbors ... It's buying class ... It's buying taste ... It goes with the lamp ... It's cheaper than a Pollock ... It's interior decoration ... It's anything but what it is. *(Beat. Rothko seems to have accepted the canvas.)* Okey-dokey. Let's prime the canvas. *(They work together now. They have done this many times, it is a well-practiced ritual. They pour the paint/glue mixture from the stove — the base layer for the canvas — into two large buckets. The mixture is a thin liquid, almost a glaze, of dark plum. They bring the buckets to either side of the six-foot square canvas. They make sure the canvas is secure. They prepare housepainting brushes. Rothko rubs his rhythmically across his hand, warming and limbering the bristles. Ken waits. Ready. Rothko stares intently at the blank canvas. A long beat as he rubs his brush back and forth across his hand, thinking. Ken watches him, poised. Then Rothko goes to the phonograph, flips through the stack of records, finds the one he wants, and puts it onto the phonograph. He lowers the needle. He listens. He lifts the needle again. Finally finds the exact place in the record he is looking for. He lowers the needle. Spirited classical music plays. He returns to the canvas. He nods to Ken. Ready? Ready. They dip their brushes. They are on opposite sides of the canvas. Ken crouches; he will do the lower half of the*

canvas. Rothko stands tall; he will do the upper half of the canvas. Ken waits for Rothko to begin. Rothko waits for the music. With theatrical panache, Rothko waits for the exact moment the music thunders most dramatically and then — he begins to paint — he moves very quickly — using strong, broad strokes he sweeps across the top of the canvas as quickly as possible — big, horizontal gestures — moving fast to make sure the base layer is even and smooth — Ken does the same for the bottom half of the painting — Some of Rothko's paint drips and splashes down on Ken — It is like choreography, they move in sync, they move toward each other and then cross, Rothko lurching back awkwardly as he continues to paint so Ken can dive in under him gracefully as he continues to paint — The thin, watery paint splatters and splashes as they dip their brushes and assault the canvas — It is hard, fast, thrilling work — The music swells — And then they are done. The white canvas is now an even, flat plain of dark plum. Rothko steps back, exhausted, panting for air. Ken sits heavily on the floor, also exhausted. Beat. Rothko lights a cigarette. Then he turns off the phonograph. Ken rises and cleans himself with a towel. Then he changes his painted-stained shirt. He begins to straighten up: hauling the buckets away; wiping up the floor; cleaning the brushes. Rothko minutely studies the now-primed canvas. Then he steps back and back, studies the canvas from across the studio. Musing.) So ... so ... so ... it'll do ... Maybe it'll do ... Possibly adequate ... What do you think?

KEN. You mean me? You want me to answer?

ROTHKO. Who else?

KEN. It's a ... a good ground, a good base layer. Nice and even.

ROTHKO. We'll see when it dries. Then I can start to paint.

KEN. You really care what I think?

ROTHKO. Not at all. *(Ken smiles, continues to clean up. Then he stops abruptly. Something about the freshly primed canvas strikes him. He stares at it. Surprisingly, tears come to his eyes. The emotion is unexpected.)* What?

KEN. Nothing ...

ROTHKO. What is it?

KEN. It's strange ... I'm remembering something ... The, um, color ... is ...

ROTHKO. What?

KEN. Doesn't matter.

ROTHKO. What?

KEN. Dried blood ... When the blood dried it got darker. On the carpet.
ROTHKO. Which carpet?
KEN. Where my parents died. *(Ken tries to shake off the thought. He moves away. But then he stops again. He can't shake the emotion. The canvas draws him back.)* It's exactly the color. When the blood dried it got *darker,* that surprised me. I remember being surprised by that ... *(Rothko is intrigued.)*
ROTHKO. What happened to your parents?
KEN. I don't want to talk about it.
ROTHKO. Yes you do.
KEN. They were murdered.
ROTHKO. Did you say murdered?
KEN. Mm.
ROTHKO. How old were you?
KEN. Seven. This was back in Iowa.
ROTHKO. What happened?
KEN. I honestly don't remember it too well.
ROTHKO. Sure you do. *(Ken stares forward, lost in thought. Beat.)* What do you see? *(Ken shakes his head.)* What do you see? *(Beat.)*
KEN. *(Reliving it.)* I woke up ... and the first thing I saw was the snow outside my window. I was glad it snowed because it was Saturday and I could go sledding. My Dad would take me sledding, me and my sister. But ... but ... I didn't smell anything. That was weird. Normally my Mom would be up making breakfast. It was really quiet. I put on my slippers — they were those Neolite ones that look like moccasins. Go into the hall ... Now it's really quiet ... And it's *cold.* There's a window open somewhere ... Then I see my sister, she's just standing in the hallway, staring into my parent's room. The door's open. My sister ... she's standing in a puddle of pee. Just staring. Her eyes ... I go to the door and look in and see the snow first. Outside the window, so much snow, maybe I'll still go sledding. And then the blood. The bed's stained with it. And the wall. They're on the bed ... It was a knife ... Apparently it was a knife, I found out later. *(Beat.)* Burglars, I found out. At least two of them ... But right now I don't know what to do. I just *see* ... I ... Don't want my sister to see anymore. My little sister ... I turn around and push her out and shut the door. The door handle ... With blood ... Is red. *(Beat.)* That's all.
ROTHKO. What happened then?

KEN. You mean after that? Um ... Nothing really. We went to the neighbors. They called the police.
ROTHKO. What happened to you two?
KEN. State took us. Foster homes. People were nice, actually. They kept us together. But they shuffled us around a lot. We were *rootless* ... She's married to a CPA now.
ROTHKO. Rootless?
KEN. Never belonged ... Never had a *place.*
ROTHKO. Did they find the guys who did it?
KEN. No. I paint pictures of them sometimes. *(Beat.)*
ROTHKO. You paint pictures of the men who killed your parents?
KEN. Mm. What I imagine them to look like.
ROTHKO. Which is what? *(Beat.)*
KEN. Normal. *(Beat. Rothko considers comforting Ken in some way, but doesn't. He moves away, lights a cigarette.)*
ROTHKO. When I was a kid in Russia, I saw the Cossacks cutting people up and tossing them into pits ... At least I think I remember that, maybe someone told me about it, or I'm just being dramatic, hard to say sometimes. *(Ken is relieved that Rothko has changed the subject. He continues cleaning up.)*
KEN. How old were you when you came here?
ROTHKO. Ten. We went to Portland, lived in the ghetto alongside all the other thinky, talky Jews. I was Marcus Rothkowitz then.
KEN. *(Surprised.)* You changed your name?
ROTHKO. My first dealer said he had too many Jewish painters on the books. So Marcus Rothkowitz becomes Mark Rothko. Now nobody knows I'm a Jew! *(Ken smiles. He continues to clean up. Pause.)*
KEN. Can I ask you something?
ROTHKO. Can I stop you?
KEN. Are you really scared of black?
ROTHKO. No, I'm really scared of the absence of light.
KEN. Like going blind?
ROTHKO. Like going dead.
KEN. And you equate the color black with death?
ROTHKO. Doesn't everyone?
KEN. I'm asking you. *(Rothko likes that Ken is pushing back.)*
ROTHKO. Yes, I equate the color black with the diminution of the life force.
KEN. Black means decay and darkness?
ROTHKO. Doesn't it?

KEN. Because black is the lack of red, if you will.
ROTHKO. Because black is the opposite of red. Not on the spectrum, but in reality.
KEN. I'm talking about in painting.
ROTHKO. Then talk about painting.
KEN. In your pictures the bold colors are the Dionysian element, kept in check by the strict geometric shapes, the Apollonian element. The bright colors are your passion, your will to survive — your "life force." But if *black* swallows those bright colors then you lose that excess and extravagance, and what do you have left?
ROTHKO. Go on. I'm fascinated by me.
KEN. *(Undeterred.)* Lose those colors and you have order with no content. You have mathematics with no numbers ... Nothing but empty, arid boxes.
ROTHKO. And trust me, as you get older those colors are harder to sustain. The palate fades and we race to catch it before it's gone.
KEN. But ... *(He stops.)*
ROTHKO. What?
KEN. Never mind.
ROTHKO. What?
KEN. You'll get mad.
ROTHKO. Me?
KEN. You will.
ROTHKO. And?
KEN. I just think ... It's kind of sentimental to equate black with death. That seems an antiquated notion. Sort of *romantic.*
ROTHKO. Romantic?
KEN. I mean ... not *honest.*
ROTHKO. Really?
KEN. In reality we both know black's a tool, just like ochre or magenta. It has no effect. Seeing it as malevolent is a weird sort of chromatic anthropomorphizing.
ROTHKO. You think so? What about equating white with death; like snow?
KEN. That's different. That's just a personal reaction. I'm not building a whole artistic sensibility around it.
ROTHKO. Maybe you should. *(They are growing heated.)*
KEN. I don't think —
ROTHKO. Use your own life, why not?
KEN. It's not that I —

ROTHKO. Unless you're scared of it.
KEN. I'm not scared.
ROTHKO. Go into all that white.
KEN. I'm not scared, it's just self-indulgent.
ROTHKO. If you say so.
KEN. Not all art has to be psychodrama.
ROTHKO. Doesn't it?
KEN. No.
ROTHKO. You paint pictures of the men who killed your parents.
KEN. That's not *all* I paint.
ROTHKO. Maybe it should be. Then maybe you'd understand what black is.
KEN. Back to that.
ROTHKO. Always.
KEN. At least equating white with death isn't so predictable.
ROTHKO. I'm predictable now?
KEN. Kind of.
ROTHKO. Dishonest and predictable.
KEN. Come on, a painter gets older and the color black starts to infuse his work, therefore, the cliché declension goes, he's depressed, he's fearing death, he's losing touch, he's losing relevance, he's saying goodbye.
ROTHKO. That's a cliché except for when it's not.
KEN. But it's not *true.*
ROTHKO. So now you know truth?
KEN. Look at Van Gogh; his last pictures are all color. He goes out and paints the most ecstatic yellows and blues known to man — then shoots himself ... Or Matisse, his last works were nothing but great shocks of primary colors.
ROTHKO. You admire those colors.
KEN. Absolutely.
ROTHKO. Why?
KEN. Well, Matisse ... he was dying, he knew he was dying, but still he was Matisse. When he got too ill to hold a paintbrush he used scissors, cutting up paper and making collages. He never gave up. On his deathbed he was still organizing the color patterns on the ceiling. He had to be who he was.
ROTHKO. And you think *I'm* the romantic! Can't you do any better than that? *(He continues, angry and derisive.)* Matisse the Dying Hero, struggling with his last puny gasp to create that final

masterpiece ... And Jackson Pollock the Beautiful Doomed Youth, dying like Chatterton in his classic Pietà-pose ... And van Gogh, of course van Gogh, trotted out on all occasions, the ubiquitous symbol for everything, van Gogh the Misunderstood Martyr — You *insult* these men by reducing them to your own adolescent stereotypes. Grapple with them, yes. Argue with them, always. But don't think you *understand* them. Don't think you have *captured* them. *They are beyond you. (He moves away, then stops.)* Spend a *lifetime* with them and you might get a moment of insight into their pain ... Until then, allow them their grandeur in silence. *(Rothko returns to studying his central painting.)* Silence is so accurate. *(Pause. Rothko seems oblivious to Ken. Ken continues to clean up for a moment. Then he stops, looks at his own painting, wrapped in brown paper. Then he looks at Rothko. Ken unobtrusively picks up his painting and exits briefly. He returns without the painting.)*

KEN. We need some coffee. Mind if I go out?

ROTHKO. Go on. *(Ken gets some money from the coffee can in which they keep petty cash. He starts to go. Rothko stops him.)* Wait. *(Rothko looks at him.)* In the National Gallery in London there's a picture by Rembrandt called *Belshazzar's Feast* ... It's an Old Testament story from Daniel: Belshazzar, King of Babylon, is giving a feast and he blasphemes, so a divine hand appears and writes some Hebrew words on the wall as a warning ... In the painting these words pulsate from the dark canvas like something miraculous. Rembrandt's Hebrew was atrocious, as you can imagine, but he wrote "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin." ... "You have been weighed in the balance and have been found wanting." *(Beat.)* That's what black is to me ... What is it to you? *(Beat.)*

Scene 4

Ken is alone, building a wooden canvas stretcher/frame. He is a good carpenter. Chet Baker or a similar jazz record plays on the phonograph. He works quietly. Beat. Then the sound of a slamming door from outside surprises him. Rothko rages in, flinging off his overcoat and hat.*

ROTHKO. THEY'RE TRYING TO KILL ME! I swear to God they're trying to kill me! Those prosaic insects! Those presumptuous, counter-jumping, arriviste SONS-OF-BITCHES! — These are the same goddamn walls where I hang! You appreciate that?! *My* gallery! *My* walls! Polluted now beyond sanitation, beyond hygiene, like the East River, choked with garbage, all that superficial, meaningless sewage right up there on the wall! The same sacred space of de Kooning and Motherwell and Smith and Newman and Pollock and ... *(He stops.)* What is this music?
KEN. Chet Baker.**
ROTHKO. Just when I thought this day couldn't get worse ...
KEN. It's jazz.
ROTHKO. When you pay the rent, you can pick the records. *(Ken takes the record off. Rothko fumes. Beat.)*
KEN. So ... how did you like the exhibit? *(Rothko is not amused. He lights a cigarette.)*
ROTHKO. *(Seriously.)* These young artists are out to murder me.
KEN. That's kind of extreme.
ROTHKO. But not inaccurate.
KEN. You think Jasper Johns is trying to murder you?
ROTHKO. Yes. *(Beat.)*
KEN. What about Frank Stella?
ROTHKO. Yes.
KEN. Robert Rauschenberg?
ROTHKO. Yes.
KEN. Roy Lichtenstein?
ROTHKO. Which one is he?

* See Special Note on Songs and Recordings on copyright page.

** Or whomever the artist is.

KEN. Comic books.
ROTHKO. Yes. *(Beat. Then the coup de grâce.)*
KEN. Andy Warhol? *(Rothko doesn't even answer.)* You sound like an old man.
ROTHKO. I am an old man.
KEN. Not that old.
ROTHKO. Today, I'm old.
KEN. If you say so. *(Ken goes back to working on the stretcher. Rothko gets a Scotch.)*
ROTHKO. My point is ... People like me ... My contemporaries, my colleagues ... Those painters who came up with me. We all had one thing in common ... We understood the importance of seriousness. *(Beat.)*
KEN. You're too much.
ROTHKO. What?
KEN. You heard me. *(Rothko turns and really looks at him. This challenging tone is new from Ken.)*
ROTHKO. What did you say to me?
KEN. Who are you to assume they're not serious?
ROTHKO. Look at their work.
KEN. I have.
ROTHKO. Not like you usually look at things, like an overeager undergraduate —
KEN. *I have.*
ROTHKO. Then what do you see?
KEN. Never mind.
ROTHKO. No. You look at them, what do you see?
KEN. This moment, right now.
ROTHKO. In all those flags and comic books and soup cans?
KEN. This moment, right now, and a little bit tomorrow.
ROTHKO. And you think that's good?
KEN. It's neither good nor bad, but it's what people want.
ROTHKO. Exactly my point.
KEN. So art shouldn't be popular at all now?
ROTHKO. It shouldn't *only* be popular.
KEN. You may not like it, but nowadays as many people are genuinely moved by Frank Stella as by Mark Rothko.
ROTHKO. That's nonsense.
KEN. Don't think so.
ROTHKO. You know the problem with those painters? It's *exactly*

what you said: They are painting for this moment right now. And that's all. It's nothing but zeitgeist art. Completely temporal, completely disposable, like Kleenex, like —
KEN. Like Campbell's soup, like comic books —
ROTHKO. You really think Andy Warhol will be hanging in museums in a hundred years? Alongside the Bruegels and the Vermeers?
KEN. He's hanging alongside Rothko now.
ROTHKO. Because those goddamn galleries will do anything for money — cater to any wicked taste. That's *business,* young man, not art! *(Ken approaches. Not backing down.)*
KEN. You ever get tired of telling people what art is?
ROTHKO. No, not ever. Until they listen. Better you should tell me? Fuck off.
KEN. You're just mad because the barbarians are at the gate. And, whattaya know, people seem to like the barbarians.
ROTHKO. Of course they *like* them. That's the goddamn point! You know what people *like?* Happy, bright colors. They want things to be *pretty.* They want things to be *beautiful* — Jesus Christ, when someone tells me one of my pictures is "beautiful" I want to vomit!
KEN. What's wrong with — ?
ROTHKO. *(Explodes.)* "Pretty." "Beautiful." "Nice." "*Fine.*" That's our life now! Everything's "fine." We put on the funny nose and glasses and slip on the banana peel and the TV makes everything happy and everyone's laughing all the time, it's all so goddamn funny, it's our constitutional right to be amused all the time, isn't it? We're a smirking nation, living under the tyranny of "fine." How are you? Fine. How was your day? Fine. How are you feeling? Fine. How did you like the painting? Fine. Want some dinner? Fine ... Well, let me tell you, *everything is not fine! (He spins to his paintings.)* HOW ARE YOU?! ... HOW WAS YOUR DAY?! ... HOW ARE YOU FEELING? Conflicted. Nuanced. Troubled. Diseased. Doomed. I am not fine. We are not fine. We are anything but fine ... Look at these pictures. *Look at them!* You see the dark rectangle, like a doorway, an aperture, yes, but it's also a gaping mouth letting out a silent howl of something feral and foul and primal and REAL. Not nice. Not fine. *Real.* A moan of rapture. Something divine or damned. Something immortal, not comic books or soup cans, something beyond me and beyond now. And whatever it is, it's not pretty and it's not fine ... *(He*

grabs at Ken's heart.) ... I AM HERE TO STOP YOUR HEART, YOU UNDERSTAND THAT?! ... *(He slaps Ken's forehead.)* — I AM HERE TO MAKE YOU THINK! ... I AM NOT HERE TO MAKE PRETTY PICTURES! *(A long beat. Rothko roams, disturbed, trying to recover his equilibrium. Ken hasn't moved.)*

KEN. So said the Cubist, the second before you stomped him to death. *(Rothko stops, looks at him.)* "Tragic, really, to grow superfluous in your own lifetime" ... Right? ... "The child must banish the father. Respect him, but kill him" ... Isn't that what you said? ... You guys went after the Cubists and Surrealists and, boy, did you love it. And now your time has come and you don't want to go. Well, exit stage left, Rothko. Because Pop Art has banished Abstract Expressionism ... I only pray to God they have more generosity of spirit than you do, and allow you some dignity as you go. *(He glances around at the paintings.)* Consider: the last gasp of a dying race ... Futility. *(Beat.)* Don't worry; you can always sign menus for money.

ROTHKO. How dare you?

KEN. Do you know where I live?

ROTHKO. *(Confused.)* What?

KEN. Do you know where I live in the city?

ROTHKO. No ...

KEN. Uptown? Downtown? Brooklyn?

ROTHKO. No.

KEN. You know if I'm married?

ROTHKO. What?

KEN. You know if I'm married? Dating? Queer? Anything?

ROTHKO. No. Why should — ?

KEN. *Two years* I've been working here. Eight hours a day, five days a week and you know nothing about me. You ever once asked me to dinner? Maybe come to your house?

ROTHKO. What is — ?

KEN. You know I'm a painter, don't you?

ROTHKO. I suppose.

KEN. No, answer me, you know I'm a painter?

ROTHKO. Yes.

KEN. Have you ever once asked to look at my work?

ROTHKO. Why should I?

KEN. Why should you?

ROTHKO. You're an *employee.* This is about me. Everything here

is about me. You don't like that; leave ... Is that what this is all about? Baby feels wounded Daddy didn't pat him on the head? Mommy didn't hug you today?
KEN. Stop it —
ROTHKO. Don't blame me, I didn't kill them.
KEN. Stop it — !
ROTHKO. Go find a psychiatrist and quit whining to me about it, your neediness bores me —
KEN. *(Explodes.)* Bores you?! *Bores you?!* — Christ almighty, trying working for *you* for a living! — The talking-talking-talking-Jesus-Christ-won't-he-ever-shut-up titanic self-absorption of the man! You stand there trying to look so deep when you're nothing but a solipsistic bully with your grandiose self-importance and lectures and arias and let's-look-at-the-fucking-canvas-for-another-few-weeks-let's-not-fucking-paint-let's-just-look. And the *pretension!* Jesus Christ, the *pretension!* I can't imagine any other painter in the history of art ever tried so hard to be SIGNIFICANT! *(Ken roams angrily.)* You know, not everything has to be so goddamn IMPORTANT all the time! Not every painting has to rip your guts out and expose your soul! Not everyone wants art that actually HURTS! Sometimes you just want a fucking still life or landscape or soup can or comic book! Which you might learn if you ever actually left your goddamn hermetically sealed *submarine* here with all the windows closed and no natural light — BECAUSE NATURAL LIGHT ISN'T *GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU! (Rothko lights a cigarette. He continues to stare at Ken.)* But then *nothing* is ever good enough for you! Not even the people who buy your pictures! Museums are nothing but mausoleums, galleries are run by pimps and swindlers, and art collectors are nothing but shallow social-climbers. So who *is* good enough to own your art?! Anyone?! *(He stops, slows, realizing.)* Or maybe the real question is: Who's good enough to even *see* your art? ... Is it just possible *no one* is worthy to look at your paintings? ... That's it, isn't it? ... We have all been "weighed in the balance and have been found wanting." *(He approaches Rothko.)* You say you spend your life in search of real "human beings," people who can look at your pictures with compassion. But in your heart you no longer believe those people exist ... So you lose faith ... So you lose hope ... So black swallows red. *(Beat. Ken is standing right before Rothko.)* My friend, I don't think you'd recognize a real human

being if he were standing right in front of you. *(Pause. Rothko's stern and uncompromising Old-Testament glare makes Ken uneasy. Ken's resolve starts to crumble. He moves away.)* Never mind.
ROTHKO. Don't give up so easy!
KEN. This isn't a game.
ROTHKO. You do make one salient point, though not the one you think.
KEN. Naturally.
ROTHKO. I do get depressed when I think how people are going to see my pictures. If they're going to be unkind ... Selling a picture is like sending a blind child into a room full of razor blades. It's going to get hurt and it's never been hurt before, it doesn't know what hurt is. *(He looks around at the mural paintings.)* That's why I'm looking to do something different with these ones. They're less vulnerable somehow, more robust, some hues from the earth even to give them strength. And they're not *alone*. They're a series, they'll always have each other for companionship and protection ... And most important they're going into a *place* created just for them. A place of reflection and safety ...
KEN. A place of contemplation...
ROTHKO. Yes...
KEN. A place with no distractions...
ROTHKO. Yes...
KEN. A sacred space ...
ROTHKO. Yes ...
KEN. A chapel ...
ROTHKO. Yes ...
KEN. Like the Four Seasons restaurant. *(Rothko stops. Ken shakes his head.)* At least Andy Warhol gets the joke.
ROTHKO. No, you don't understand —
KEN. It's a fancy restaurant in a big high rise owned by a rich corporation, what don't I understand?
ROTHKO. You don't understand my intention —
KEN. Your intention is immaterial. Unless you're going to stand there for the rest of your life next to the pictures giving lectures — which you'd probably enjoy. The art has to speak for itself, yes?
ROTHKO. Yes, but —
KEN. Just admit your hypocrisy: The High Priest of Modern Art is painting a wall in the Temple of Consumption. You rail against commercialism in art, but pal, you're taking the money.

ROTHKO. I —
KEN. Sure, you can try to kid yourself you're making a holy place of contemplative awe, but in reality you're just decorating another dining room for the super-rich and these things — *(He gestures to the murals.)* — are nothing but the world's most expensive *over-mantels. (The words sting Rothko. Beat.)*
ROTHKO. Why do you think I took this commission?
KEN. It appealed to your vanity.
ROTHKO. How so?
KEN. They could have gone to de Kooning, they went to you ... It's the flashiest mural commission since the Sistine Chapel.
ROTHKO. You would have turned it down?
KEN. In a second.
ROTHKO. Easy for you to say.
KEN. You know what it is? It's your Oldsmobile convertible ... Come on, you don't need the money. You don't need the publicity. Why make yourself a hypocrite for the Seagram Corporation?
ROTHKO. I didn't enter into this capriciously, you know. I *thought* about it.
KEN. No kidding.
ROTHKO. And of course it appealed to my vanity, I'm a human being too. But still I hesitated ... The very same thoughts: Is it corrupt? is it immoral? just feeding the whims of the bourgeoisie? should I do it? ... I'm still thinking what the murals might look like when I take a trip to Europe. I happened to go to Michelangelo's Medici Library in Florence. You been there?
KEN. No.
ROTHKO. When you go, be sure to find the staircase, it's hidden away. It's a tiny vestibule, like a vault it's so cramped, but it goes up for three stories. Michelangelo embraced this claustrophobia and created false doors and windows all the way up the walls, rectangles in rich reds and browns ... Well, that was it ... He achieved just the kind of feeling I was after for the Four Seasons. He makes the viewer feel he is trapped in a room where all the doors and windows are bricked up, so all he can do is butt his head against the wall forever. *(He turns to Ken.)* I know that place is where the richest bastards in New York will come to feed and show off ... And I hope to ruin the appetite of every son-of-a-bitch who eats there.
KEN. You mention this to the Seagram's people?
ROTHKO. It would be a compliment if they turned the murals

down. They won't. *(Ken thinks about this. Beat.)* You wanna drink?
KEN. *(Surprised.)* Sure. *(Rothko pours two glasses of Scotch. He gives one to Ken. Beat.)* I don't know ...
ROTHKO. What?
KEN. I don't know that I believe you.
ROTHKO. About what?
KEN. *(Re: the murals.)* Them — This malicious intent of yours. The old lion still roaring, still trying to provoke, to be relevant, stick it to the bourgeoisie — it doesn't scan.
ROTHKO. Too romantic for you?
KEN. Too cruel to them. Your paintings aren't weapons. You would never do that to them, never reduce them like that. Maybe you started the commission thinking that way but ... then art happened ... You couldn't help it, that's what you do. So now you're stuck. You've painted yourself into a corner, you should forgive the expression. *(Ken moves away. Rothko remains standing, unsure.)*
ROTHKO. No, you're wrong. *(Ken doesn't respond.)* Their power will transcend the setting. Working together, moving in rhythm, whispering to each other, they will still create a *place. (His words sound hollow.)* You think I'm kidding myself. *(Ken doesn't answer.)* You think it's all an act of monumental self-delusion ... Answer me. *(Rothko stares at Ken.)* Answer me.
KEN. Yes. *(Rothko continues to stare intensely at Ken. Beat.)* I'm fired, aren't I?
ROTHKO. Fired? ... This is the first time you've existed. *(Rothko drains his Scotch, takes his hat and overcoat.)* See you tomorrow. *(He goes. A beat as Ken stands, a little mystified. Then he moves forward to study the central painting. He stands, glass of Scotch in one hand, tilting his head, very Rothko-like.)*

Scene 5

The room is almost in darkness. Classical music plays loudly from the phonograph. Rothko is slumped awkwardly on the floor, gazing up at the central picture. There is a bottle of Scotch and a bucket of red paint next to him. He has been drinking for a long time, but is not drunk. He can barely be seen in the gloom. A long beat. Ken enters.

KEN. *(Over the music.)* CAN I LOWER THE MUSIC? *(Rothko doesn't respond. Ken lowers the volume. Then he turns on some more lights: He stops — it is a shocking sight — Rothko's hands and arms are dripping with red. It's paint, but looks just like blood. Ken thinks he has slashed his wrists.)* Oh Christ ...
ROTHKO. I was going to paint.
KEN. Obviously ... Jesus Christ ... You want a towel or something? Maybe a paintbrush? *(Ken gets a bucket of water. Cleans Rothko's hands. Beat.)*
ROTHKO. I went there.
KEN. What?
ROTHKO. The Four Seasons.
KEN. Ah.
ROTHKO. After our "chat" yesterday ... I went there. For dinner.
KEN. Ah.
ROTHKO. It's been open a couple weeks now, thought I should finally take a look ...
KEN. And...? *(Rothko pulls himself up, unsteady.)*
ROTHKO. *(Reliving it.)* You go in from Fifty-Second ... Then you go up some stairs to the restaurant ... You *hear* the room before you see it. Glasses clinking, silverware, voices, hushed here but building as you get closer, it's a desperate sound, like forced gaiety at gunpoint ... You go in, feel underdressed, feel fat, feel too goddamn Jewish for this place. Give your name. Pretty hostess gives you a look that says: "I know who you are and I'm not impressed, we get millionaires in here, pal." She snaps for the maître d' who snaps for the captain who snaps for the head waiter

who brings you through the crowd to your table, heads turning, everyone looking at everyone else all the time, like predators — who are you? what are you worth? do I need to fear you? do I need to acquire you? ... Wine guy comes, speaks French, you feel inadequate, you obviously don't understand, he doesn't care. You embarrass yourself ordering something expensive to impress the wine guy. He goes, unimpressed. And then ... you can't help it, you start hearing what people are saying around you ... Which is the worst of all ... *(Beat.)* The voices ... It's the chatter of monkeys and the barking of jackals. It's not human ... And everyone's clever and everyone's laughing and no one looks at anything and no one thinks about anything and all they do is chatter and bark and eat and the knives and forks click and clack and the words cut and the teeth snap and snarl. *(Beat.)* And in that place — *there* — will live my paintings for all time. *(Beat. He finally turns to Ken.)* I wonder ... Do you think they'll ever forgive me?

KEN. They're only paintings. *(Ken stares at him. It's like a challenge. Rothko holds his gaze. Pause. And then Rothko seems to come to some decision. He goes to the cluttered counter and finds the phone. He looks up a phone number in an old notebook as:)*

ROTHKO. *(Re: the phonograph.)* Turn that off, would ya? *(Ken turns off the record player as Rothko dials. On phone.)* Mister Philip Johnson, please. This is Mark Rothko on the line *(He waits, then.)* ... Philip, this is Rothko. Listen, I went to the restaurant last night and lemme tell you, anyone who eats that kind of food for that kind of money in that kind of joint will never look at a painting of mine. I'm sending the money back and I'm keeping the pictures. No offense. This is how it goes. Good luck to ya, buddy. *(He hangs up with a joyous finality.)*

KEN. *(Proud.)* Now ... now you are Mark Rothko.

ROTHKO. Only poorer.

KEN. Having money doesn't make you wealthy.

ROTHKO. It helps though.

KEN. Well, this is a day for the books, we'll have to —

ROTHKO. You're fired. *(Ken stops.)*

KEN. What?

ROTHKO. You're fired. *(Beat. Ken stares at him. He can't believe it.)*

KEN. Why? *(Rothko busies himself organizing something.)*

ROTHKO. Doesn't matter.

KEN. It does.
ROTHKO. Write down your address, I'll send your final check.
KEN. You owe me an explanation.
ROTHKO. I don't owe you anything — *(Ken pursues. Rothko tries to avoid him. The conflict builds.)*
KEN. Two years and you expect me to walk out, just like that?
ROTHKO. You want a retirement party?
KEN. I want a reason.
ROTHKO. None of your business.
KEN. I want a reason.
ROTHKO. Look, you're too goddamn needy, all right? I don't need it. I don't need your need. Since you're seven you're looking for a home — well this isn't it, and I'm not your father. Your father's dead, remember? Sorry, but that's it. *(Ken isn't deterred.)*
KEN. Come on, Doctor Freud. You can do better. *Why?*
ROTHKO. I told you.
KEN. Why?
ROTHKO. Because I don't need an assistant —
KEN. Bullshit.
ROTHKO. Because you talk too much —
KEN. So do you.
ROTHKO. Because you have lousy taste —
KEN. Bullshit.
ROTHKO. Because I'm sick of you —
KEN. Bullshit — *(Rothko spins on him, points to the outside.)*
ROTHKO. *Because your life is out there! (Beat.)* Listen, kid, you don't need to spend any more time with me. You need to find your contemporaries and make your own world, your own life ... You need to get *out there* now, into the thick of it, shake your fist at them, talk their ear off ... *(Rothko steps close and grabs Ken.) Make them look. (Ken is moved. Rothko continues with quiet emotion.)* When I was your age, art was a lonely thing: no galleries, no collecting, no critics, no money. We didn't have mentors. We didn't have parents. We were alone. But it was a great time, because we had nothing to lose and a vision to gain. *(Beat.)* Okay?
KEN. Okay. *(Beat.)* Thank you. *(Rothko puts his hand on Ken's heart.)*
ROTHKO. Make something new. *(Rothko steps away. Ken gathers his things and starts to go. He stops at the door. He turns back. He takes in the paintings and Rothko one last time. Re: the central*

painting.) What do you see? *(Ken looks at the painting. But then he looks at Rothko. Beat.)*
KEN. Red. *(Beat. Ken goes to the phonograph and puts on a record. Classical music plays. Ken goes. Rothko seems a little lost. He moves to the central painting and stares at it. Pause. Rothko stands alone.)*

End of Play